

Chasing GOD

A **STUDYGUIDE** BY KATY MARRINER



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Introduction

This study guide to accompany *Chasing God*, a documentary by Wide Open Productions, has been written for middle and senior secondary students. It provides information and suggestions for learning activities in Religious Education.



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About the Film

We are about to follow the most elusive and most controversial figure in recorded history. Known about in every country of the world and hotly debated in every language under the sun, no one has been so passionately argued about or so fiercely defended.

- Film Publicity

For many people, a belief in God is a significant aspect of their life experience, defining their individual identity and their search for meaning. Such a belief allows people to explain the nature of existence and the purpose of human life. It guides people's personal and communal behaviour and plays an important part in maintaining and shaping cultures. Three-quarters of the world's population believe in a Higher Power, yet there is no universally accepted concept of this mysterious being. *Chasing God* offers

a contemporary and challenging exploration of religious belief.

Through interviews with religious leaders from diverse faiths, scientists, atheists, anthropologists and the devout, *Chasing God* offers a provocative discussion of God's place and purpose. The documentary takes us to places of worship where people of faith invoke the divine. These scenes of belief are juxtaposed with scenes of unrest and destruction that allow the filmmakers to explore whether God is still relevant in today's harsh world.

Chasing God is narrated by award-winning comedian Dawn French, of comedy duo *French & Saunders* and *The Vicar of Dibley* fame.

The score was composed by Michael Timothy, musical director for the band Massive Attack.

About the Filmmakers

Lenny De Vries

(Producer/Co-Director/Co-Writer)
Founder, director and producer of Inazuma Performances, De Vries toured four major theatrical works to Japan, Holland, the UK, India, Chile, Thailand and Australia. She has taught directing at Melbourne University, the Victorian College of the Arts, La Trobe University and The College of the Arts in Utrecht, Holland. In 1999, de Vries moved into filmmaking. She has directed and produced the short film *A Faint Reality* (1999).

Dylan Burton

(Cameraman/Co-Director/Co-Writer) has worked for Radio Pacific and Radio New Zealand as a news reader, announcer and sound engineer. He has produced radio documentaries. In 1997, Burton moved into filmmaking as a director and cameraman. Burton has worked



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for Living Time Films in London and as a freelance filmmaker. His film credits include various corporate video projects, a pilot for the Asian satellite TV channel The Star Network and the short film *A Faint Reality* (1999).

Using Chasing God in the classroom

Teachers may select from the following activities to support students' viewing and a close analysis of *Chasing God*.

Key People/Profiles

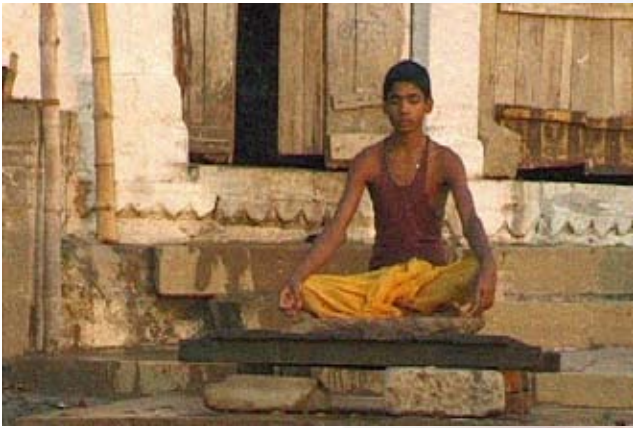
Chasing God interviewed experts in the subject areas of atheism, anthropology, meditation, religion and science. The interviews were filmed on location in Australia, India, Italy, Israel, Palestine and the USA

- Anthropology
Richard Heinberg is an author and lecturer from San Francisco, USA.

- Atheism
Phillip Adams is a broadcaster, columnist and commentator from Sydney, Australia.
- Buddhism
Gese Sonam Rinchen is a senior teacher at the Dalai Lama Temple and is an international lecturer on Tibetan Buddhism from Dharamsala, India.
- Christianity
Cardinal Francis Arinze is President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue from Vatican City, Europe.
Padre Enzo Fortunato is the spokesman for the Franciscan Order from Assisi, Italy.
Reverend Rowena Curtis is a pastor of the Baptist Church from Melbourne, Australia.
- Hinduism
Shri 1008 Jagadguru Dr Chandrashekhar Shivacharya

Mahaswamiji from Varanasi, India.

- Islam
Iman Sheikh Yahya Safi is Imam of Lakemba Mosque and Director of Da'wah and Fatwah Office from Sydney, Australia.
- Judaism
David Rosen is a rabbi and Director of the Anti-Defamation League from Jerusalem, Israel.
- Meditation
Dadi Prakashmani and Dadi Gulzar are Chief Administrators of the rahma Kumaris World Spiritual University from Mount Abu, India.
- Science
Professor Ian Johnston is Associate Professor in Physics at Sydney University, Australia.
- Sikhism
Giani Puran Singh Ji is spiritual and temporal head of the Sikhs from Amritsar, India.



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- Sufism
Sufi Sheikh Abdelsalaam Menasre is Sufi of the Quiderit Order from Nazareth, Israel/Palestine

What significance does religion play in the lives of the people profiled in Chasing God?

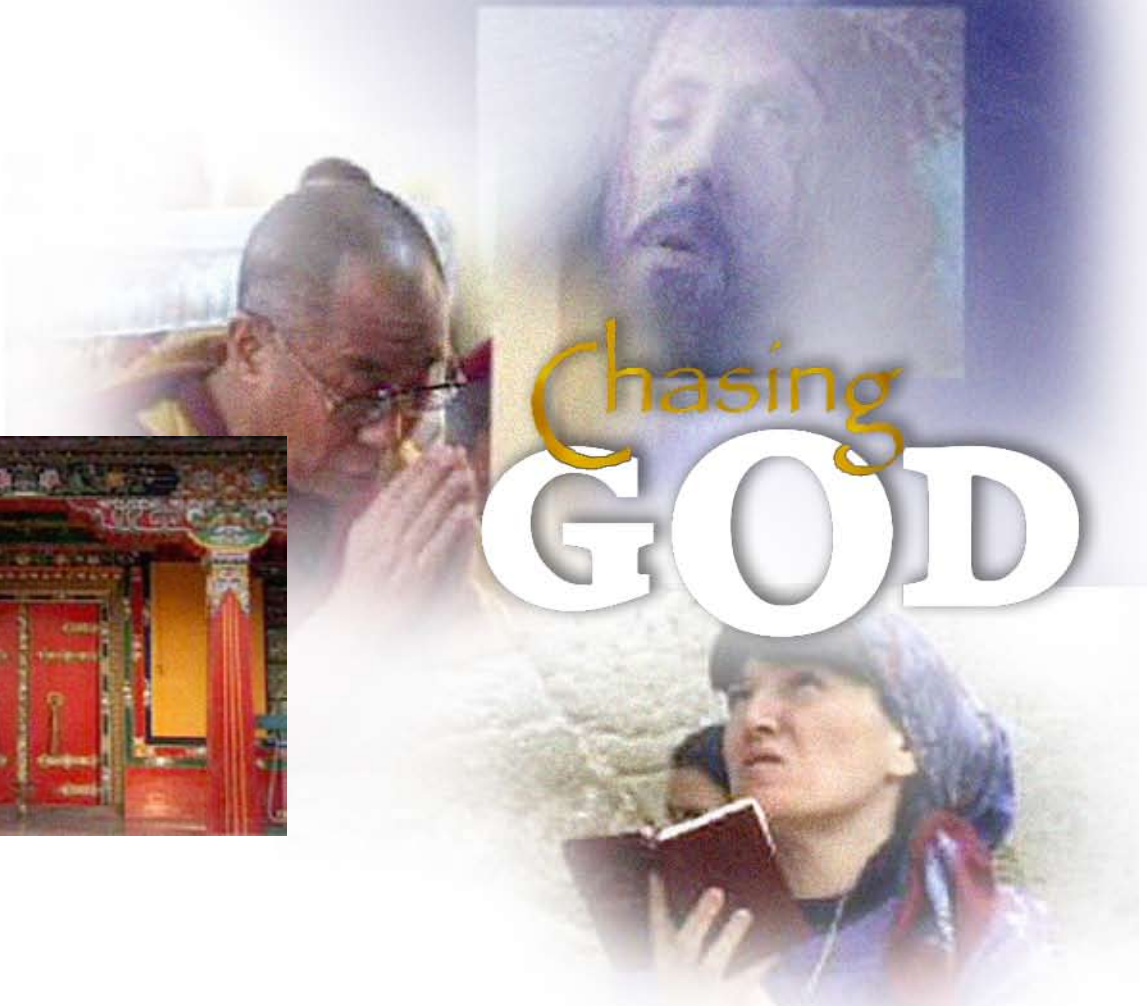
Before viewing the documentary

- Spend time defining and discussing the students' understanding of the following key concepts and terms:
 - Agnosticism
 - Anthropology
 - Atheism
 - Buddhism
 - Christianity
 - God
 - Hinduism
 - Humanism
 - Islam
 - Judaism
 - Meditation
 - Science

- Sikhism
- Sufism
- What gives your life meaning? Create an A4 collage in answer to this question. Use both words and images. Compile the collages to form a belief mural in the school chapel or a place of reflection.
- *As we know, Almighty God is incomprehensible, meaning that he is beyond human comprehension.* (Iman Sheikh Yayha Safi)
Ask students to write a definition of an inanimate object such as a chair or a table. When students share their definitions, consider how the descriptions could be applied to many other things both inanimate and animate. This task creates an opportunity to discuss how defining an object in a way that is accurate and grasps its total meaning is difficult. This understanding can then be used

to discuss the difficulty of defining God.

- 'God is ...' Ask every student in the class to finish this claim. Spend time discussing each response.
- A religion is a form of belief through which human beings express their sense of ultimate reality. People practice this belief in an individual and collective way. This is an accepted definition of religion. Ask students to use their own words to define religion.
- Use paper and other materials to make a belief journal. Ask students to answer the following questions in their journal. Assure them that the journal is a personal document and they do not have to share all of their responses with the class.
 - What place does God have in your life?
 - Think of symbols, celebrations, statements and codes of



behaviour that confirm your belief in God. Create a document that describes your experience of God.

- As you have grown from a child to an adolescent, how has your understanding of God changed?
- Why believe in God?
- Is God still relevant?

After viewing the documentary

- When does *Chasing God* affirm your beliefs?
- When does *Chasing God* challenge your beliefs?
- Why have the filmmakers chosen to name the documentary *Chasing God*?
- What are the central concerns of the documentary?
- Who do you think the documentary is trying to communicate its messages to?
- Organize a panel discussion that

explores the issues raised by *Chasing God*.

Work in small groups and ensure every member of the group assumes a relevant persona and argues a given perspective.

- The biggest thing since ... the Dawn of time. What does this tag line tell us about *Chasing God*? Does it make *Chasing God* more approachable?
- Is *Chasing God* entertaining?

Close Analysis

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I don't think there's anything or anyone that has inspired such unlimited hope, inspiration and solace as God has. Yet there's still no universally accepted 'understanding' of this higher power. This magnificent mystery truly fascinates me. (Lenny deVries, Co-Director, *Chasing God*)

Chasing God is the culmination of a long-held desire to produce a program about humanity's enduring search for truth, and its source.

If there is a Supreme Being with a universal connection to all of humanity, I'm fascinated to know how this mysterious puzzle might be solved to bring unity and harmony in our world. (Dylan Burton, Co-Director, *Chasing God*)

- As a class, discuss the filmmakers' understanding of God and their commitment to the project.
- The following statements about God are made in *Chasing God*. What claims best describe your understanding of God? Do you disagree with any of the claims? Are there any statements that you find difficult to understand? Share your perspectives and questions with other members of the class.



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- He is beyond human comprehension.
- There are diverse ways of relating to him.
- I felt that he is my friend.
- He might not exist at all.
- He never experiences sorrow.
- Whoever searches for him, will find him.
- He must be dead.
- Based on my experience, God definitely exists.
- As we know Almighty God is incomprehensible.
- I adore him.
- We know that God is wisdom and that there is reason and purpose behind all He creates.
- God is the essence of all powers.
- Whatever we want in our life we can attain from God.
- God is different things to different people but God is love.

- You can call Him Vah e Guru Akal Purkh, call Him God, Allah, Ram, Rahim. Yet He is only One.
- Believers argue that the most important sign of the kingdom of God among us is the presence of a compassionate love for all people. This love is a deliberate choice, an act of will. Write about a situation where you were impressed by the goodness of a person you have met or have known for a long time.

God: a relentless search

- Why do people look for God? Discuss the explanations offered by religious leaders and experts in *Chasing God*.
- Should we chase God or should we let God chase us?

God: reality or imagination

He does exist. He doesn't exist. He does exist. He doesn't exist ... According to a worldwide religious census, there are

approximately four-and-a-half billion people, living today, who believe in a Higher Power.

- Write a letter to yourself in which you reflect upon a personal experience that changed one of your beliefs.
- Belief can be labeled as unquestioning belief, belief with reservations, elective believing and cultural believing. Use the Internet and print sources to define each type of belief. How do these differing ways of believing influence how people participate in their religion?
- In this section of *Chasing God*, religious leaders and experts discuss both belief and doubt.

List the perspectives expressed by Rabbi David Rosen, Giani Puran Singh Ji, Iman Sheikh Yahya Safi, Phillip Adams, Professor Ian Johnston and Gese Sonam Rinchen. What factors influence belief in



God?

- How is a belief in God affirmed?
How is a belief in God challenged?
- Make a list of significant life experiences and reflect on how these may correlate with a belief in God.
- How does a belief in God influence an individual's response to significant life experiences?
- How do people find personal meaning through a belief in God? Interview a family member or friend about how a belief in God has shaped his or her life.
- How does a belief in God shape the growth and transformation of communities? In helping students to answer this question begin with a discussion of the school community.
- Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? This is a

question asked by both those who believe in God's presence in the world and those who challenge God's existence. What answers does *Chasing God* offer its audience?

Worship

- As a society and as individuals who do we revere in a way that many revere God?
- Visit local places of worship and learn more about belief and worship from the leaders of these faith communities.
- Make a list of ways individuals express a belief in God. What ways of expressing belief are portrayed in *Chasing God*? Teachers should ensure students have a knowledge of the components of a religion:
 - Formal statements of belief
 - Myths and other stories
 - Sacred texts and other religious

writings

- Sacred signs and symbols
- Sacred spaces
- Sacred people
- Sacred time
- Rituals
- Oral and written codes of behaviour
- Social structures
- Religious experience

God: a most controversial role

Throughout history and still now, atheists and believers alike have questioned God's apparent indifference. Their voices may be varied but their questions are the same: Where is God now? How can He or She let this happen? These are some of humanity's most persistent and heartfelt questions. (Narrator)



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In *Chasing God* Phillip Adams, a committed atheist, defends his perspective that God does not exist by claiming, 'take the swastika and all it signifies for the twentieth century. A god that would allow the Holocaust to occur – my God!' Cardinal Arinze argues that 'Suffering in the world doesn't prove that God is not there but it can prove that human beings are not using their freedom well.' Rabbi David Rosen believes that 'God gives us the free will. And the free will means that we can do wonderful things and we can do terrible things.'

- Conduct a class debate that explores both sides of this debate. Encourage students to use the arguments presented in *Chasing God* and further research to develop a persuasive stance.
- Make a list of the social ills that are present in Australian

society. God's presence can be seen in the ways people work to challenge these inhuman and unjust conditions. Research the work of an organization that strives to overcome one of these social ills and make God's love and compassion known.

- *When people are in great difficulty and feel helpless then they search for something which is greater than themselves that can lend them support. (Gese Sonam Rinchen)*
Until humans feel sorrow, they don't remember God. (Shri 1008 Jagadguru Dr Chandrashekhar Shivacharya Mahaswamiji)

Is it wrong to only depend on God in times of great need?

God: up close and personal

In the end the existence of a Higher Power is either a universal truth or a mass delusion. In the absence of any veritable proof, what we are left with are

personal experiences. (Narrator)

- Are personal experiences enough proof of God's existence?

Revelation is God's self disclosure. The revelation of God takes place in many ways. One way is through creation. Other ways are through the events of history, within sacred stories, within sacred writing or scriptures and through religious teachings and statements of faith. God is also revealed through individual experience.

God gives life meaning. Religious people have a sense that there is something beyond the ordinary experiences of life and that this something gives purpose to life. The sense that there is something beyond the ordinary is often termed the sense of mystery, of the holy or the sacred.

- Discuss the stories of God's revelation shared by Sufi



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Abdelsalaam Menasre, Dadi Gulzar, Giani Puran Singh Ji, Dadi Prakashmani, Iman Sheikh Yahya Safi, Padre Fortunato and Reverend Rowena Curtis. Having listened to their stories what do you now understand about God's revelation?

- Do you know of other stories of God's revelation?

But others have simply given up on the idea of God (Narrator)

- Listen to Phillip Adams' story of giving up on God. What do you think of Adams' understanding of revelation?

God: a slippery character

This Higher Power is depicted in as many different ways as imagination will allow. From a bearded old man, to an all-seeing eye in the sky, to a simple, living point of light. As yet there is no one universally accepted image of God. (Narrator)

- What is anthropomorphism?
- Describe God. Ask young children to share their perceptions of God through words and pictures.
- In this section of *Chasing God*, Phillip Adams, Reverend Rowena Curtis, I 008 Jagadgura Chandrashekhar, Rabbi David Rosen, Iman Sheikh Yahya Safi, Professor Ian Johnston and Dadi Gulzar offer their perception of God's identity. elect those statements that describe your perception of God's identity.
- *Chasing God* offers vox pops of adults and children that reflect on God's identity. Take a digital photograph of a family member or friend. Ask them to describe their idea of a God. Create an A5 colour print vox pop that includes both the photograph and the statement. Compile the prints to form a vox pop wall in a prominent area of the

school.

- *I think it would be very difficult for it not to be the same One.* (Reverend Rowena Curtis)

Religions are products of different histories, different cultures, different contexts, that are diverse ways of relating to Him or Her. (Rabbi David Rosen)

Which God? Use the Internet and print sources to research how different religions perceive God. Having established the similarities and differences, present your findings in a multimedia format.

God: the final piece

- *Chasing God* asks 'How will God make an appearance at the end of time?' What do the answers of the religious leaders and experts have in common? What statements do you support? How would you answer this question?



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Production Values

- The documentary's priority is to explore belief in the existence of God. How do the production values of *Chasing God* reflect this aim?
- What expectations does the opening sequence create? How are you positioned as a viewer? What does it reveal of the filmmakers' stance?
- What is the role of the narrator? How does the narration shape your response to *Chasing God*?
- *Chasing God* makes significant use of interviews. How does this filmic technique shape the structure of the documentary and inform our understanding of the documentary's subject?
- How do images work in a symbolic way to reveal the concerns of *Chasing God*?

- Examine the filmmakers' use of news footage and still photographs.
- Consider the use of different settings and explain what each setting brings to *Chasing God*.
- How does music contribute to *Chasing God*?
- Watch the closing sequence of *Chasing God*. What is the filmmakers' intention and how is this intention achieved?
- Write a critical review of the production of *Chasing God*.

Extended Responses

- The filmmakers claim that *Chasing God* 'is a thought provoking film that addresses a subject matter rarely tackled'. Discuss.
- *Chasing God* has been described as a 'very worthwhile and ambitious project'. Is this an accurate assessment of the documentary?

- 'A belief in God shapes a person's identity.' Discuss.
- Reverend Rowena Curtis claims, 'We need God even more now.' Do you agree?
- Debate the topic: 'There is no place for God in today's individualistic society.'

Going Further

- *Chasing God* examines how Asian religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism and Jewish religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam regard God. The documentary does not offer an exploration of how Primal religions such as Australian Aboriginal religions and religions of the Pacific Islands regard God. Use the internet and print sources to identify the core beliefs of a Primal religion and how these core beliefs



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- are expressed.
- A study of different religions and the examination of the relationship between religion and culture provides students with an increased awareness of the world around them. Allow students to work in small groups to identify the fundamental beliefs of a religious community and to explore how these beliefs shape the culture of the community and the lives of individuals within the community. Each group should present the results of their investigation as a media production.
- *The Spirit of Generation Y*, a joint project between Monash

- University, Australian Catholic University and the Christian Research Association has found that only forty-eight per cent of Generation Y, those born between 1976 and 1990. Record the interviews on video or audio tape and edit the interviews to create a short documentary suitable for TV or radio broadcast.
- God in Film: Watch excerpts from films and television programs that focus on a person's life experiences and belief in God.
- God in Music: Find examples of contemporary songs that are about

- a belief in God. Ask students to bring a recording of a song or the lyrics of a song to class.
- God in Art: Arrange a guided tour at the art gallery in your capital city that explores the way God has been depicted in art.
- God in Literature: How have poets, playwrights and novelists used writing to imagine God? Read and discuss selected passages.
- God in Sacred Texts: Find passages that reveal the way different religions use sacred texts to illuminate their belief in God.
- 'God is dead.' (Nietzsche) Use the Internet and print source to research what



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significant philosophers have had to say about God.

Some Web Sites of Interest

- <http://www.aasr.org.au>
The Australian Association for the Studies of Religion offers a directory of websites relevant to religion
- <http://www.beliefnet.com>
Beliefnet is a comprehensive site on religion.
- <http://www.chasinggod.net>

References

- Sarah Price and Susanna Kass 'Generation Y turning away from religion', *Sunday Age*, 6 August 2006, p.6.
- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Religion and Society Victorian Certificate of Education Study Design, Victoria, 2005.

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